



# The Power of a Masterwork

By Brian Ferriso

**W**hat makes for an unequaled and unforgettable art experience? For me, it is a transformative personal encounter with an object; a moment filled with meaning and understanding; an epiphany.

I began my professional career in the arts as a painter. During summers off from teaching high school art classes, I would paint in the Vermont countryside under the tutelage of Frank Mason of the Art Students League. The classes were traditional, based on the model of apprenticeship in the master's studio. Saturday "crits" were especially important. One by one, a student's work was placed in front of the "master," who would provide verbal commentary and hands-on corrections that often transformed a mediocre, amateur work into a singular and powerful

image. The process not only resolved the execution, it emphasized isolated display.

Another resonant aspect of my student life was my graduate thesis, which focused on a single object: the 11th-century bronze doors from the Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino. This intricately executed set of doors offered the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of aesthetic qualities and stylistic characteristics that reflected a conflation of Western and Eastern designs. Their combination shed light on medieval trade routes and the complex relations between the abbey and its influential leader Desiderius, the Papacy and the Byzantine Empire. This singular object provided an endless source of research inquiry.

Subsequently, as an intern at the Frick Collection in New York, I found myself

surrounded by numerous masterpieces in situations that permitted a sustained and focused experience. From Jean-Baptiste Corot's iconic landscape installed within the Garden Court to James McNeill Whistler's monumental portraits in the East Gallery, these works and their presentation provided unlimited viewing satisfaction.

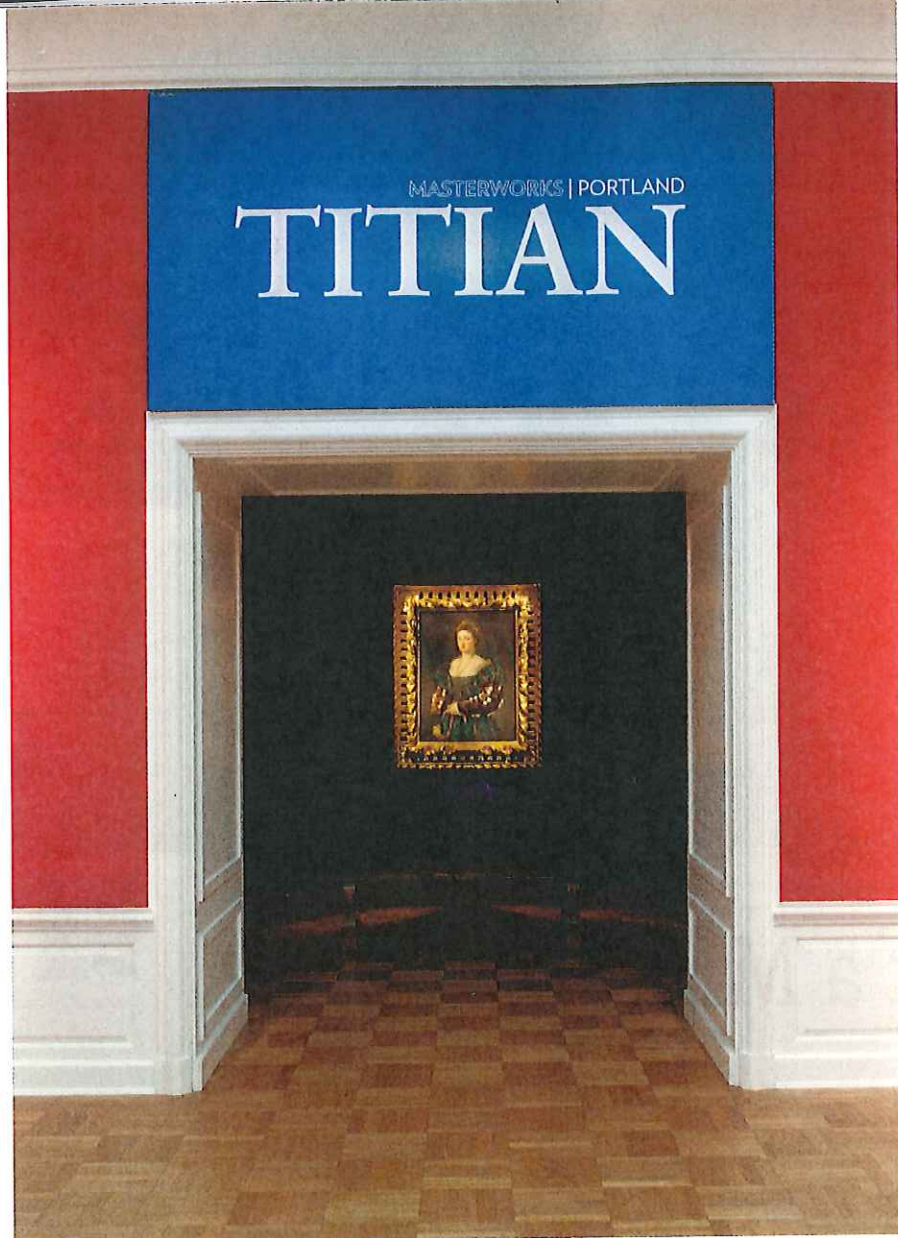
These formative experiences established in me a museological attitude that celebrates and emphasizes the importance and power of one. A consequence of this philosophy was the development of the Portland Art Museum's Masterworks Program in 2009.

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Art museums today are inundated with new ideas and strategies to maintain

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Titian's *La Bella* (1536) was the most recently featured work in the Portland Art Museum's Masterworks series.

or increase their relevance. Although a number of meaningful and effective approaches have been implemented, such as using new technologies to add layers of interpretation, there has also been a steady stream of proposals that have the potential to distract institutions away from their mission of collecting and exhibiting great works of art.

The pressure for change can be attributed in large part to the desire and need for art museums to be relevant. The recent recession has intensified the pressure, inducing higher levels of anxiety about the sustainability of art museums among staff, boards and key stakeholders. To counteract this deluge of ideas

and the perceived requirement to implement them, the Portland Art Museum has instituted a mission-affirming, cost-efficient and highly successful program that celebrates great works of art. Although the Masterworks Series builds on the historical precedent of the 1963 exhibition of Leonardo's da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art, it also fulfills a conviction in the power of one that I have held since my student days.

The origin of the museum has its roots in antiquity, when celebrated objects with artistic resolve adorned the public and private realms. From there, the concept evolved from the Renaissance

cabinet of curiosities to the establishment of many significant museums during the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment in Europe followed by America. These pioneering organizations embodied the commitment to the object-centered institution that celebrates humanity's finest aesthetic achievements.

The landmark 1992 AAM publication of *Excellence and Equity*, which outlined principles that encouraged the museum's public service and educational role, coupled with the increased recent desire for relevance, have had a profound effect on the art museum; foundational aspects are being challenged by a barrage of new ideas. Today, historical precedents are being upended and art museums are undergoing redefinition. Evidence for this is widespread: the frequency of community-curation projects that defy curatorial authority; the number of exhibitions focusing on popular culture rather than historic movements; and new business models that rely heavily on earned income and transactional contributions rather than unencumbered philanthropic dollars. In fact, the *Wall Street Journal's* 2010 article "No More Cathedrals of Culture" posits that some "see museums as modern-day 'town squares,' social places where members of the community gather, drawn by art, perhaps, for conversation or music or whatever." Along with this redefinition of the museum's foundation, sadly, some values are being lost.

The Portland Art Museum's Masterworks Series is an initiative and strategy to preserve the core tenets of an art museum as well as maintain its relevance. Annually, for the past three years, the museum has featured a single masterwork in an installation that celebrates it as solitary and unique. Attendant programming is intended to deepen appreciation and understanding; marketing



and advertising seek to increase audience awareness. The Masterworks exhibitions embrace the Portland Art Museum's foundational mission in an economy in which decreased resources have spawned an overwhelming onslaught of ideas to address funding shortages and relevance. Internally, the Masterworks Series is treated like any of the museum's major special exhibitions, which often present as many as 100 works of art.

Raphael's *La Donna Velata* (1516) from the Palazzo Pitti in Florence launched the Masterworks exhibition program in 2009. This icon of the High Renaissance provided a visual tour de force for visitors and at the same time reinforced the museum's core mission and relationship with our audience: to provide encounters

with humankind's most important artistic creations. The display that emphasized the singularity of the masterpiece was augmented by a publication and programs that included a scholarly lecture and a musical performance. During its 10-week presentation, more than 22,000 visitors experienced Raphael's famous painting; nearly 12,000 of them were not members of the museum. The Portland Art Museum secured more than \$225,000 in underwriting, which enabled promotion of the exhibition in *The Oregonian* newspaper and the *New York Times*, as well as advertising on radio and television. Press coverage included *The Oregonian* as well as a number of local and national blogs.

The second in the Masterworks Series was Thomas Moran's *Shoshone Falls* (1900)

from the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Okla. It spent 12 weeks (from October 2010 to January 2011) in Portland in a specially designed gallery, augmented by several of Moran's watercolors and scholarly programming. The publicity was treated much as it was for the Raphael. In the end, attendance numbered 38,000 (including 26,000 nonmembers). Given the proximity of the actual Shoshone Falls to Portland—about 500 miles away—and the Northwest region's general admiration of the landscape, it is not surprising that numerous outdoor enthusiasts and artists were among the visitors.

On display from November 2011 to January 2012, the most recently featured work in the Masterworks series was

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Titian's *La Bella* (1536), also from the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. The 42,000 visitors included 28,000 nonmembers; on average, 770 visited per day. A newly initiated visitor survey provided insightful and encouraging feedback and results. For example, 147 (or nearly half of the 310) surveyed visited the museum specifically to see the work, and 300 stated that the exhibition met or exceeded their expectations. For those whose expectations were met or exceeded, 88 percent appreciated being able to see this work outside of Italy, and 28 percent expressed an increased interest in other works in the museum's collection. With regard to its presentation, 78 percent stated that having the work in isolation helped them focus on the experience, and 64 percent spent more time looking at the work because of its isolated display.

Anecdotal comments for all three exhibitions to date centered on the uplifting and transcendental experience, and increased curiosity regarding Titian, the Renaissance, depictions of women and other works from this period in the museum's collection. The Titian painting, like the Moran, also received a thoughtful four-page spread of text and images of the work and its installation at the museum in *The Oregonian*.

One desired outcome of the Masterworks Series has been the attention generated toward the Portland Art Museum's permanent collections. By installing the Raphael and later the Titian in a gallery adjacent to the museum's Early Christian and Renaissance Kress Collections, visitors came into contact with works by Granacci, Bronzino and Strozzi. Moran's *Shoshone Falls* similarly

encouraged visitors to experience the American collections, which include paintings by Bierstadt, Inness, Weir and Hassam.

The need for resources and relevance will continue to influence and affect the central mission of the art museum. Nonetheless, the success of Portland's Masterworks Series reinforces the notion that the foundational mission to bring together viewers and great works of art is still relevant and vital. Moving too far away from this core can indeed lead the art museum into territory that will ultimately make it irrelevant rather than relevant. Jumping from one untested theory or practice to another in the spirit of hopeful innovation can weaken a museum and dilute its meaning.

It is anticipated that the forces that are currently pushing art museums in

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different directions will only intensify in the future. A 2012 report by AAM's Center for the Future of Museums outlines a number of developments that could profoundly influence the art museum, including crowdsourcing, the potential elimination of the museum's nonprofit status, museum experiences outside of the facilities, alternative means of funding, an aging population, augmented realities made possible by new technologies, and new educational models and landscapes for learning. Ultimately, it is essential for museum leadership to recognize the forces at hand and evaluate them critically and continually. We must employ those with promise and merit, and resist the fads that weaken the essence of an institution that is founded on the object. ●

Internet. The Alliance's Information Center also offers access to sample documents to representatives of institutional member museums.

### How do we tactfully dismiss a volunteer who has done something wrong?

Conduct a one-on-one conversation with the volunteer and try to be positive. Give her every opportunity to change; divert her to positive behavior if you can. Your goal is to make volunteers successful. If that fails, having job descriptions, policies and procedures established can help you dismiss someone. Once you have those in place, people know the rules and you can apply them—just as in any other office. ●

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